

RECYCLING VIDEO: SORTING THROUGH THE PAST

Raindance Foundation 20th Anniversary Celebration

At The Kitchen, New York

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By John Minkowsky

The inaugural days of independent video, some 20-odd years ago, were, by all accounts, a heady time. SONY's newly available portapak was put to use as a tool for non-corporate, decentralized, interactive, and socially committed TV production in an epoch marked by innumerable calls for cultural revolution among disaffected members of the first television generation. Anti-war sentiments, post-colonial struggles, the liberation of the psyche, ecological issues, and a host of other political and social causes coincided, serendipitously or not, with the first intellectual scrutiny of the effects of mass media and a widespread criticism of its methods and content (often from such unlikely sources as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman Newton "Vast Wasteland" Minow and Nicholas "Talk Back to Your Television" Johnson). TV was, by the 1960s, a firmly entrenched American institution and, therefore, to be regarded with suspicion by activist media artists and summarily subverted. A wondrous panacea only 20 years before, mainstream television was ripe for reevaluation and revision.

Independent video is itself now two decades old and equally due for retrospective analysis. It goes without saying that the field of electronic communication, not to mention American culture as a whole, is vastly different than it was at the turn of the 60s. Once the purview of a shaggy fringe of countercultural workers driven by ideals of better living through radical technopractice, alternative TV – as a result of technological innovation, commercial appropriation of styles and techniques from the media arts community, new channels of distribution for independent work, and a variety of other phenomena – has grown increasingly similar to the traditional TV fare it once opposed and to which it promised to serve as an antidote. The major likeness between video practitioners then and now has been a shared desire to create something different from standard commercial programming, however vaguely defined that difference, at times, may appear.

It is in the spirit of a need for reevaluation and reclaiming the radical goals of the first generation of independent media artists that The Kitchen, a preeminent venue for video exhibition, chose to celebrate the Raindance Foundation on the occasion of their coincident 20th anniversaries. A loose confederation of activists sharing equipment and an ideological agenda, Raindance was responsible for the now-classic periodical of countercultural communication, *Radical Software* (published during the early 1970s); for numerous projects in which it served both as organizer and funding umbrella; and for the emergence of other significant video collectives, including Top Value Television (TVTV). To pay tribute to and foster analysis of this important (anti)institution and, more generally, the philosophical underpinnings of alternative TV, The Kitchen's former video curator Dale Hoyt assembled a panel of seven pioneers in the field, which was followed by the screening of a large sampling of complete tapes and snippets produced between

1969 and 1991 by Raindance founding members Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Paul Ryan, Beryl Korot, and others.

Within the framework of the panel format, the participants ventured a wide range of approaches from their collective past, from autobiographical reminiscences to broader historical and critical accounts. There were, of course, the obligatory encomia to Raindance's efforts and influence, recollections of the cultural climate out of which independent video emerged, and a registry of signal events and individuals that shaped the alternative TV movement. There were also attempts to appraise the conceptual distance video has traversed in its evolution and the width of the gap between early, visionary enthusiasm for wholesale cultural change and the art form's subsequent retrenchment. This last category was as much implied as explicitly described, often through panelists' personal accounts of their recent work (or lack thereof) and through their relative disengagement from (and perhaps disillusionment with) the video scene over much of the past decade. The loss of a high-spirited innocence, how it came about, and what it signifies and portends were subtextual motifs that informed the ensuing exchange among participants and audience members.

For example, panel moderator Frank Gillette, the co-founder of Raindance responsible for its name (a parody, he noted, of the Rand Corporation) and author of an early theoretical text, *Between Paradigms* (1973) described his "burn out" on art and technology investigations in early '80s, his subsequent return to painting, and an only recent and as yet tentative interest in returning to electronic media. Beryl Korot, once an editor of *Radical Software* and a prominent installation artist throughout the 1970s, echoed Gillette's quandary, having herself abandoned video for most of the last decade in order to work in painting as well. Unlike Gillette, however, Korot is currently reemerging after her long hiatus with a forthcoming video/theater piece entitled *Cave*, a collaboration with her husband Steve Reich that will explore cultural dualism in the Middle East.

Largely absent from the video scene of late, Russell Connor spoke exclusively of his earliest encounters with video art. The erstwhile host of Boston TV station's *Museum Open House* series, and ersatz TV "commentator" in many of Nam June Paik's early tapes, Connor recalled with characteristic wit his organization of the first museum exhibition of video art, "Vision and Television," held at Brandeis University in 1970, a groundbreaking show that prompted then Rose Art Museum director William Seitz to comment, "It's a mess, but it might be history."

Davidson Gigliotti, another innovator in the genre of video installation and creator of such tapes as *After Montgolfier* (1979), is also one of the most insightful writers about the medium. Appropriately enough, he chose to recount a history of the literature that had stimulated proponents of the nascent video movement – from the Spatialist manifestoes of Lucio Fontana to the works of cyberneticians, media theorists, social scientists and philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innes, Gregory Bateson, Buckminster Fuller, and Teilhard de Chardin.

Speaking from their own personal histories, Aysha Quinn and John Sturgeon, who often worked in tandem in Southern California during the '70s, injected a note of enthusiasm and optimism into the proceedings by describing the creative possibilities that video has afforded them throughout their careers. For Sturgeon the medium provided a means of integrating his varied interests in the plastic arts, writing, and performance. "Video," he said, "was a very big house ... that allowed expression in almost any vein." For Quinn, originally an actress, video represented a means of self-empowerment through defining and controlling her own televised image. Despite their acknowledgment of a post-euphoric "depression" that has characterized the field in recent times, both artists maintained that decentralized, low-tech video has remained a viable tool for social change and free-ranging personal expression.

Always a committed activist, Paul Ryan expressed his sustained commitment to portable video as a crucial instrument for cultural transformation, thereby explicitly bridging the 20-year interval that was the seminar's veiled focus. Author of *Cybernetics of the Sacred* (1974) and a forthcoming collection of essays, *Video Mind, Earth Mind*, Ryan spoke briefly of the "Earthscore" method he has been developing since the 1970s by which video technology might be used to monitor cultural events and ecological structures through the creation of a shared, non-language-biased perception. Although its fundamental principles remain elusive, Ryan's work with the "Earthscore" method reaffirms video's earliest commitment to sociopolitical engagement through electronic media.

Of the tributes paid to Raindance Ryan's reflections were, perhaps, the most thoughtful. Raindance had offered, he felt, a paradigm for peaceful subversion at a time when others were promoting violent confrontation. This succinct insight spoke as much to the dichotomous nature of '60s counterculture as it did to the bases for Ryan's own creative program.

Other participants' remarks formed an amalgam of significant facts and key figures and events in video history that brought the medium wider recognition and guided it through early adolescence. In addition to Gigliotti's review of significant authors and the concepts they espoused, Gillette essayed a summary of video's formative years. He described first the broad cultural backdrop against which alternative TV was conceived, including not only the confluences of '60s utopianism, the rise of media theory, and access to the means of non-broadcast production, but the minimalist aesthetics and conceptualist thinking that were prevalent in the art world at that time. Gillette also strove to distinguish between precursors of and influences upon the advent of video. The former was exemplified by Fluxus, which included, among its repertoire of iconoclastic gestures, ridicule of technology, and the latter by the conceptual, process-oriented art of Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman, and others.

Nearing the conclusion, panel members began to ask each other questions and took questions from the audience. Raindance, Gillette had earlier noted, was founded in 1969 as a for-profit corporation, converting to non-profit status and reliance on public funding only two years later. What if, Ryan queried, Raindance had succeeded in becoming self-

sustaining without public assistance? He went on to note some of the visionary projects that had fallen by the wayside in the scramble for tax dollars, including the initiation of a “Center for Decentralized Television” for multicultural exchange. Gillette reflected that the reliance on public funding had largely “ghettoized” video as a subspecies of art practice. It was a disarmingly simple observation that nonetheless underscored a fundamental historical contradiction: that the countercultural video movement, from the beginning, was reliant upon the very institutional models it sought, in principle at least, to defy if not destroy.

Closing comments by two other panelists seemed to further encapsulate the failed promise of video’s early years. The reason we foundered at that time, Gigliotti remarked, was that “we had an understanding of technological choices but not a good understanding of human beings.” Ryan, in his turn, issued what came closest to a call to arms: the field, he noted, had become so enmeshed in legacy work (such as this very symposium represented) that it was failing to develop new theories about video practice that might help to keep alive the critical and utopian edge of its formative years.

In the best tradition of early videotape exhibitions, the post-panel screening was relaxed and informal. Amidst a reception on the first floor, the continuous playback of two different channels of video was reduced to an ambient, unfocused presence. The second floor, however, was given over to more concentrated viewing, with seating for single-channel playback. A peripatetic viewer (such as one was invariably expected to be) could catch, in no particular order, fragments of documents from the hippie era and beyond: Woodstock, Altamont, Abbie Hoffman, and the first Earth Day (1969/70), the 1972 Republican Convention and the Vietnam and Iraqi War protests (1972/91), as well as the redoubtable “Television as a Creative Medium” exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery (1969), the massive “Video Skulptur” show in Koln, Germany (1989), and a variety of other, more personal pieces. Glitch-laden, raw, and all but unedited, these energetic artifacts spoke no less eloquently than the panelists that had come before of what has been lost and gained in the evolution of independent video.

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